



Introduction to Quarter Sessions Records: England's County Court System

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Introduction

Basic civil, criminal and even ecclesiastical justice began at the parish level. The parish constable often dealt with petty disputes and crimes. Parish officers could report parishioners and even the minister to the archdeacon or bishop in the form of Churchwarden's Presentments. Lords of the manor might also be able to adjudicate civil and criminal issues. County officers could deal with petty to major offenses. National courts dealt with offences deemed major. One should remember that what is considered a misdemeanor today may have once been considered major.

For ancestors who may have broken the law, who were the victims of criminal acts, or who served as jurors, witnesses, or Justices of the Peace, there can be confusion as to where to begin finding these kinds of records. Quarter sessions records are undoubtedly the place to start.

Court of Quarter Sessions

From 1388 to 1972, Justices of the Peace were empowered by the King to meet four times a year, or quarterly, to hold Courts of Quarter Sessions. These sessions were to be held around the time of well-known feast days of that time: Easter (spring), Trinity (midsummer), Michaelmas (late September) and Epiphany (January). Quarter Session Courts exist in every county in England except Middlesex. Middlesex and London took place in the Old Bailey Sessions which were held monthly.

County Quarter Sessions could be held in a different town for each of the quarterly sessions. There may also be sessions specific to a borough or city. The initial goal of each session was to finish the work in one day. When this was not possible, an additional session might be held later in the week known as an adjourned session. By the 1800's, the increased volume of work required the addition of concurrent sessions as well as the adjourned sessions. Concurrent sessions means there may be more than one series of records for the same time period. The more serious cases brought before the Court of Quarter Sessions may be referred to Assizes. The holding of Quarter Sessions and their cases are often mentioned in newspapers.

Around the 1730's, as the workload grew, Petty Session Courts began to be held. Their jurisdiction roughly followed the jurisdiction of the Hundreds in each county. The courts were presided over by magistrates and dealt with the accused who were often brought

before them by parish constables. They dealt with many juvenile offenses, bastardy, drunkenness and decided which cases should be referred to the Quarter Sessions.

Justices of the Peace

Quarter Sessions were presided over by a minimum of three Justices of the Peace (JPs). These were unpaid positions that were made by appointment at the beginning of the reign of a new monarch. The qualifications for being a JP were that someone be a Gentleman of the Law and an Esquire or Knight residing in the county and the owning an estate worth at least £20. Later, the land value requirement was increased to £100 as well as a member of the Church of England. Considering the workload and importance of the work, the possible lack of significant legal training is remarkable. By 1600, there were at least 30 JPs in each county. More serious crimes were referred to the Assizes, which were presided over by Royal Judges. These Royal Judges reviewed the work of the JPs and kept them up to date with new laws passed by Parliament.

Finding Quarter Sessions Records

Quarter Sessions records are found in county archive offices. They are some of the oldest and largest collections held there. Before consulting these records for your county, it would be wise to review the holdings in the archive office catalog. A good catalog will help you know where the sessions were held in each county and learn what records exist for a specific time period.

The Discovery Catalog of the National Archives UK has descriptions of records held at over 2,500 archives across the UK and are worth checking. A search for the term “Quarter Session” uncovered over 763,000 records from 227 “record creators”. Many are abstracts of Quarter Session records naming individuals.

FamilySearch has microfilmed many Quarter Session records. See the table at the end of this handout for the FamilySearch Catalog titles by county. Some Petty Session Court records have also been microfilmed and a **Keywords** search with the name of the county and the term “petty session” or “petty sessions” should quickly uncover these. Ancestry.com has digitized records for Dorset, Lancashire, Warwickshire and Lancashire.

Contents of Quarter Sessions Records

The records are recorded in books called Minute Books, Session Rolls and Court Rolls. The Minute Books are a good place to start because they should list the people who attended and the nature of the issue at hand. They lead to the larger collection of records that may include:

Depositions: These interviews of witnesses are often the most detailed and informative. They give the deponents residence and perhaps their occupation along with details of their testimony. Their signature should also be recorded.

Indictments: Provide the name of the accused, their residence, the date and place of the offense. The names of accomplices, victims and witnesses may also be included.

Examinations: These are the statements made by the accused under oath and may give similar details as the depositions.

Order Books: Like Minute Books, these record the verdicts and sentences of the court.

Besides criminal and some civil matters, many of the laws to be enforced related to poor law. As a result, records included involve Apprenticeship Indentures, Bastardy Orders, Settlement Certificates, Removal Orders, Land Tax Assessments and Coroner's Reports.

Many are in Latin until 1732. Clerks may abbreviate. Some accused and prisoners gave false names. Until more are digitized online, they will be much more difficult to access.

Bibliography

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McLaughlin, Eve. *Quarter sessions : your ancestor & the law*. (Aylesbury, England : Varneys Press, c1995). FHL# 942 P27meq.

Ratcliffe, Richard E. B. *Basic facts about -- quarter session records*. (Bury, Lancashire, England: Federation of Family History Societies (Publications), c2007). FHL# 942 P27r.

Raymond, Stuart A. *Tracing your ancestors through county records: a guide for family and local historians*. (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword Family History, 2016). FHL# 942 D27rstc.

Table of Quarter Sessions Holdings at FamilySearch

County	FamilySearch Catalog Titles	County Archives Catalog Link
Bedfordshire	Quarter session rolls, 1714-1851	http://bedsarchivescat.bedford.gov.uk/#Archive
Berkshire	Quarter session records, 1703-1853; Quarter session records for Maidenhead, 1686-1835; Quarter session records for the borough of Newbury, 1739-1827, 1836-1871; Quarter session records for the borough of Wokingham, 1776-1852; Quarter session records for Windsor, 1657-1837	https://www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/search-catalogue
Buckinghamshire	N/A	https://archives.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/
Cambridgeshire	N/A	https://calm.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/calmview/
Cheshire	Judicial session books (Order books), 1819-1851; Judicial session files, 1617-1800	http://catalogue.cheshirearchives.org.uk/calmview/
Cornwall	N/A	https://kresenkernow.org/learning/learning-from-home/discover-your-family-history/
Cumberland	N/A	https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/archives/archivecentres/cac.asp
Derbyshire	N/A	https://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/record-office/records/catalogue/catalogue.aspx
Devon	Quarter session order books for Devonshire, 1592-1934; Quarter session bastardy returns for Devonshire, 1844-1857; Quarter session estreat books for Devonshire, 1718-1862; Quarter session high and petty constables presentments for Devonshire, 1659-1737, 1768; Quarter session lists of freeholders for Devonshire, 1711-1810	https://swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives/catalogues-and-indexes/

Dorset	Quarter session records, 1625-1951; Miscellaneous quarter sessional records for the Borough of Bridport, 1581-1742	https://archive-catalogue.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/
Durham	England, Durham, quarter session records; Durham quarter session rolls, 1471-1625; Abstract of session orders	http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/article/10526/Collections-Search
Essex	N/A	https://www.essexarchivesonline.co.uk/
Gloucestershire	N/A	https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-archives/
Hampshire	Miscellaneous records relating to Hampshire and the town of Romsey	https://calm.hants.gov.uk/
Herefordshire	N/A	https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/herefordshire-archive-records-centre/visit-herefordshire-archive-records-centre/1
Hertfordshire	Hertford Co. Quarter Session records, ca. 1631-1690	https://www.barnet.gov.uk/libraries/local-studies-and-archives/more-about-local-studies-archive
Huntingdonshire	Quarter session records of Huntingdon, 1782-1900	https://calm.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/calmview/
Kent	England, Kent, quarter sessions and court files : COLLECTION RECORD, 1558-1899; Kent quarter session rolls, 1599-1602; West and East Kent Quarter Session order books, 1625-1863; West Kent quarter session papers, 1801-1883	http://185.121.204.47/calmview/
Lancashire	Quarter Sessions petitions : catalogue (calendar), 1648-1908; petitions, 1648-1684; Quarter sessions calendars for the borough of Liverpool, 1844-1876	https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/448/archives_and_local_history/7377/search_the_archives_catalogue
Leicestershire	N/A	http://www.recordoffice.org.uk/resources/catalogues/
Lincolnshire	Lincolnshire links with Australia, 1788-1840 : Lincolnshire convicts to Australia, 1788-1840	https://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/history-heritage/lincolnshire-archives
Middlesex/London	Calendar of Middlesex sessions, books and orders of the court, 1607-1612, 1639-1751; London session records, 1605-1685	https://www.british-history.ac.uk/ ; https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/forms/formMain.jsp ; https://www.digitalpanopticon.org

Norfolk	Quarter sessions books, 1565-1852; Quarter session order books, 1650-1791	https://nrocatalogue.norfolk.gov.uk/
Northamptonshire	N/A	https://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/councilservices/archives-and-heritage/northamptonshire-archives/Pages/default.aspx
Northumberland	England, Northumberland, Berwick-upon-Tweed, quarter session records, 1568-1819; Quarter sessions records, 1719-1875	https://calmview.northumberland.gov.uk/
Nottinghamshire	Miscellaneous quarter session records, 1380-1800; Quarter session court books, 1481-1808; Court in Session records, 1714-1858; Quarter session minutes, 1840-1855; General quarter session draft minute books, 1802-1841; Court records for the Liberty of the Archbishop of York of Southwell and Scrooby, 1747-1837; General quarter session minutes for the liberty of Southwell and Scrooby, 1804-1829; Quarter session draft minute books for Newark borough, 1811-1888; Quarter session minute books for Newark borough, 1720-1862; Quarter session rolls for Newark borough, 1773-1799	http://nawcat.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/DServe/search.htm
Oxfordshire	Oxfordshire sessions of the peace in the reign of Richard II	https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/leisure-and-culture/history/oxfordshire-history-centre/search-our-catalogues
Rutland	Court records, 1743-1913	http://www.recordoffice.org.uk/resources/catalogues/
Shropshire	Shropshire quarter session rolls, 1831-1835	https://www.shropshirearchives.org.uk/
Somerset	N/A	https://www.batharchives.co.uk/online-catalogues
Staffordshire	N/A	http://www.archives.staffordshire.gov.uk/CalmView/
Suffolk	N/A	https://www.suffolkarchives.co.uk/
Surrey	Surrey Quarter Session papers, 1700-1799	https://www.surreyarchives.org.uk/
Sussex	Sussex quarter sessions settlement orders and cases, 1661-1749; Order books, 1642-1850	https://www.thekeep.info/collections/

Warwickshire	N/A	http://archivesunlocked.warwickshire.gov.uk/CalmView/
Westmorland	Session rolls, 1726-1850	https://cumbria.gov.uk/archives/Online_catalogues/default.asp
Wiltshire	Quarter session records, 1603-1700; Bastardy records for Wiltshire	http://calmview.wiltshire.gov.uk/CalmView/
Worcestershire	Worcester County Records. The quarter session rolls [1591-1643; published in book form]	https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/services/collections/archive-services/
Yorkshire	West Riding sessions records, 1597-1642; Quarter Session roll, minutes and order books for Yorkshire North Riding (Richmond), 1605-1881; Quarter session files and index for quarter session files for East Riding Yorkshire; Transportation from Hull and the East Riding to America & Australia taken from Quarter Session records	https://archivesunlocked.northyorks.gov.uk/CalmView/default.aspx